

## **“Put it in Writing: Jeremiah”**

*Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

The prophet Jeremiah lived through the end of the world. It wasn't literally the end of the world, of course, but as far as everyone there was concerned, it might as well have been. They witnessed all of the horrors of a proper apocalypse. Their nation was being gradually devoured by the regional struggle taking place between larger empires. The little kingdom of Judah didn't really stand a chance while the Babylonians and the Egyptians slugged it out on either side of them. They tried some political maneuvering, making some alliances in an attempt to get the superpowers pitted against one another, but in the end they were just too small and too in the way. And so Jeremiah and his nation watched as their political machinations backfired, and the Babylonians took away their king and installed a puppet king in his place, and so you could no longer really trust the people in charge any more. Suspicion and fear and conspiracy lurked everywhere.

But then things got worse. Eventually the Babylonians got fed up with this little rebellious client kingdom and decided to teach them a real lesson, so they sent their army to besiege and conquer Jerusalem. No more fooling around. Jeremiah was there, in the middle of the fear and the conspiracy, and then he was inside those city walls, too, with hordes of enemy soldiers preventing anything getting in or out. Surely they started with rationing, trying to make every scrap of food last as long as possible. But a lot of food doesn't really last all that long, so by prolonging it you're only giving yourself a future of eating rotten, stale food. But then the food ran out, and starvation set in, and people began eating things that shouldn't be eaten. What else can you do? And finally, almost mercifully, the Babylonians broke through the walls, and Jerusalem, the city that was the focal point of God's people for so long, was destroyed.

The king made it out of the city, only to be caught on the run. They blinded him and imprisoned him, but not before they made him watch while they slaughtered his sons and any other potential successors to the throne they could get their hands on. They wanted to make it clear that the royal line was ending here and now. They destroyed the temple of the Lord, burning the structure and carrying off anything of value to be used as trophies in a foreign land. They killed the priests like they killed the princes; the kingdom of Judah as you know it and all of its institutions are gone. And then they took anyone of value away to Babylon to live in exile, never to return. The only people left were there to work in the fields to raise crops for their Babylonian masters. End of the world.

And through all of this, Jeremiah had the unenviable task of being a prophet of the Lord. Many times in history, prophets had been the ones to speak hope into dire situations: trust in the Lord, and He'll bring us through this. Jeremiah didn't live in one of those times. He lived during the time when the covenants God had made with His people, the covenants they had broken time and time again, came into full force. The covenants had stipulated that if they maintained their covenant relationship with God, He would protect them and bless them and bless others through them. If they did not maintain their covenant relationship, God's blessing and protection would be removed, and the result would be famine, plague, and the sword. They had not been maintaining their covenant relationship — as Jeremiah said in our passage today, God had been a faithful husband to them, but they had not been a faithful wife to Him. And so the famine, plague, and sword were upon them.

Again, often the people would look to the prophets as God's spokespersons for comfort and guidance, but they weren't getting that from Jeremiah this time. They didn't want to hear what God was actually saying, so they went their own way instead. False prophets had the message they wanted to hear — that God would save them, and there would be peace — so they listened to that rather than what God was saying through Jeremiah. God told them to repent, but they didn't want to hear it, and they went their own way. God warned one king not to pick a fight with these larger empires, but they got involved anyway. God later told them to surrender to the Babylonians, and they certainly didn't want to hear that.

As they persistently went their own way, Jeremiah was given the task by God to warn the people about what they were doing. That's never an easy job. If you have a friend who's getting married, and you know that the marriage is going to be a disaster, you can warn them ahead of time, but it's not an easy job. If someone has their heart set on something and you try to tell them it's not a good idea, it's never an easy job. And worse than that, Jeremiah is basically telling his nation that they have no one to blame for their situation but themselves. Even when that's true, not many people take it well when they hear that. Even though Jeremiah was a genuine prophet who was speaking the messages of God, people responded to him just about as well as you might expect. His life was characterized by bitterness, weeping, rejection, persecution, and attack.

But in the midst of broken covenants, smoking ruin, and persistent bitterness comes an interesting little line of Scripture. It's in verse 26 of chapter 31, shortly before our passage for today, and it comes right in the middle of the promise of restoration and faithfulness that our passage is part of. Right after God says, "I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint," Jeremiah says this: "At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me." And it continues on with God's promise of restoration. It's this odd, momentary interruption not only of the chapter, but of Jeremiah's whole story of bitterness and loss and ruin and weeping. There is this one moment of sweet, restful sleep.

It has been observed that sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap. When you're in the midst of a crisis and you're emotionally drained, sometimes what you need more than anything else is a pleasant sleep. In Jeremiah's case, it makes us wonder whether this oracle from God is coming to him in a dream, or maybe it's more likely that Jeremiah was so used to hearing messages of doom and blame, and he was so used to seeing deprivation and horror, that to receive a message of hope and restoration and promise must seem like a dream. After thirty chapters of plots against him and messages of destruction and bringing charges against the people and watching as God's judgment is made, this is the first sustained message of hope in the book of Jeremiah. You can't fault Jeremiah for wondering if he's just dreaming this.

This taste of sweetness is the promise of a new covenant. It seems like the end of the world, and it seems like things cannot get better, and it seems as though surely the relationship has been broken so thoroughly that God must abandon the people of Israel. But no, there is now this promise of a new covenant. This new covenant will not be like the old one, God says. The problem with the old covenant wasn't really with the covenant itself; the problem was with the people trying to keep it. There's this persistent determination to go our own way, a persistent insistence that my ways are better than God's ways. God says not to waste my time and resources worshipping false gods, but I'll cover my bases just in case and keep a few idols on the side. God says to trust Him with my resources

and my protection and my provision, but I'll put my trust in my own smarts and strength and wealth instead. The covenant was written in stone, but it's pretty easy to look at something else instead.

But this new covenant, this sweet dream, is different. God promises a covenant that will be written so deeply within us that we will follow it naturally. It will be so deeply ingrained that there won't even be a need to teach it to one another, because it will just become a part of us. This is a different sort of covenant than we've seen so far. During the course of this season of Lent, we've seen God make covenants with His people in a variety of ways. Sometimes, as with Noah and David, God simply made a promise, a grant of grace to His people. He simply and willingly restrained Himself or committed Himself to something with no strings attached. Sometimes, as with Abraham and Moses, the covenant was to be their God if they would be His people, and being His people involved certain requirements on their part, like being circumcised or following the Torah. But this is not a grant and it's not a list of requirements, this is a change of being, a realignment of our natures back toward God.

We are not in exactly the same situation today. One of the fallacies Christians sometimes make in the United States these days is to think of our country as being in the place of Israel in the Old Testament, as though we Americans are specially chosen by God as a nation. You'll hear people say that if we don't honor God as a nation, then He'll remove His blessing from us and punish our country. And that's simply not true, at least not in the way people think of it. We do not have a national covenant with God, and our land was not given to us as part of God's promise. However, it is certainly true that we, like all nations and all individuals, prefer to go our own way. We do not love our neighbors consistently, and we certainly don't make a habit of loving our enemies. We do not practice generous love; instead, we hoard and we stockpile and we consume and we waste. We do a terrible job at taking care of the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the voiceless. We trust strength and politics and wealth and pleasure before we trust God.

Or we could bring it to a personal level, since a nation is nothing but a collection of individual people. We choose to go the way of bitterness or hatred or holding a grudge rather than God's way of forgiveness. We choose to accept the world's ways of sexuality, in which humans are reduced to pieces of meat and faithfulness is reduced to convenience. We choose to go the way of dissipation and distraction rather than investing our time in God and others.

But then we awake and look around, and there is pleasant sleep. Going our own way leads to the bitter end of the world, but there is the sweet hope of God's new covenant. The work of Jesus is what gives us hope of a transformed being. This is work that we cannot do on our own. As the writer of our passage from the book of Hebrews explains, Jesus became our example through His humble submission to His Father as well as His humble trust in His Father's faithfulness to Him. But more than just being our example, He became our way as well. The image used in our reading is of Jesus as our high priest, as one who enters into the holy place before the presence of God and makes atonement for the sins of the people. And like a high priest, Jesus, through His life and death and resurrection, opened wide our way to God. He sealed the new covenant of God.

He is the true answer to our questions, though in some cases we don't even know how to ask our questions well. He is our way, the way to walk in God's chosen paths. And as we come to Him and He makes us right with God, that new covenant that is so sweet is written deep in our hearts and minds. It is by following Him — not by following a list of rules, but by following the person of Christ —

that we keep this covenant. There are good things in this world that God uses for our good, so it's certainly not wrong to use things like medicine or knowledge or technology or money when they are needed, but Christ is the way, and we do all things through Him and committed to Him.

Our theme as we read about these covenants God has made is that they show us the things God cares about enough to put in writing, to commit Himself to, to reveal His character and being. And today we see a covenant that comes in the darkest of times, a covenant of hope and rest and promise. It's a covenant that points us to a God who is known by forgiveness and redemption, who makes plans to include in His family those who are scattered, hopeless, and lost. What do you need to put in writing in response during this season of Lent? How has God called you to go deeper in holiness?



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